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THE
Landscape Element
IN
AMERICAN POETRY.

BRYANT.

THERE is an element of the poetic feeling peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon race, or, at least, peculiarly developed by it, *i. e.* the perception of the influences of external nature. I shall call it, for present convenience, the Landscape Element. In English poetry, Scott, Thomson and Wordsworth, expressed it most fully. In America, Bryant, Lowell and Street; and while they agree in the sentiment of wildness and an untrammelled delight in landscape, there is in each, a different view of it.

Without in any way calling in question any other relation of the genius of either, I shall endeavor to follow out this thread of green running through the web that each has woven, that it may, if possible, be made a more powerful aid to artistic study. It would be interesting to follow out the suggestions of this thought into social and political existence, and see wherein the impressions of inanimate nature enter into that compound which we are, and how much of all that is characteristic may be owing to them. For the present I shall only study the influence on our poetry.

In Bryant there is an influence not readily discernible as proceeding from landscape, but which, to my mind, is the source of much of the solemnity of his thought—a certain majestic harmony which tells of the might of nature's operations. For instance, in the "Evening Revery:"

— "Gently—so have good men taught—
Gently, and without grief, the old shall glide
Into the new; the eternal flow of things,
Like a bright river of the fields of heaven
Shall journey onward in perpetual peace."

How full is the impression of external things! Some mighty memory of nature mingling with the dream of life, bore him onward to the ocean. The images belong to landscape, and could only have come from his wanderings by river side and mountain. Again, in the "Return of Youth:"

"Thy pleasant youth a little while withdrawn,
Waits on the horizon of a brighter sky;
Waits, like the morn, that folds her wing, and hides
Till the slow stars bring back her dawning hour."

"Hast thou not glimpses, in the twilight here,
Of mountains where immortal morn prevails?
Comes there not through the silence to thine ear,
A gentle rustling of the morning gales;
A murmur, wafted from that glorious shore
Of streams that water banks for ever fair,
And voices of the loved ones gone before,
More musical in that celestial air?"

The landscape feeling is not perceived as such distinctly, yet steals in, giving tone and color to the sentiment, and none but one who has studied nature earnestly and lovingly could have written those lines, or have felt the serenity and faith in the Eternal Laws which they breathe. I would that space allowed me to quote the whole of the "Unknown Way" in further illustration of this point. In the "Walk at Sunset" the feeling becomes more evident, and the images are distinctive, and not merely themes suggestive of thought to the poet.

There is manifested a delight in them for their own sake, and here begins to steal out that which I regard as distinctive in the landscapist—the love of external beauty for itself, rather than as a point to hang a moral on. It is this which makes the landscapist—painter, whether in words or colors—this strong imagery of nature,—the recognition of its phenomena. Thus in the "Thanatopsis"—

—"The hills,
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods—rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green."

How full of truth the epithet "rock-ribbed" is, every one must feel who has been among the Adirondacks, and seen the edges of the massive strata protruding through the soil, visible for miles, and seeming like the ribs of some vast structure, half-hidden. And how, in the last line, are hidden a thousand memories of tiny brooks, with their stripe of green marked windingly through the brown summer meadows!

In landscape we generally begin with foregrounds, and the poet, as the painter, should paint them well before he goes further. Bryant's poems abound with fine foreground passages. In the "Winter Piece" we have some close study:

—"Bright mosses crept
Over the spotted trunks, and the close buds
That lay along the boughs, instinct with life
Patient, and waiting the soft breath of Spring,
Feared not the piercing spirit of the North.
The snow-bird twittered on the beechen bough,
And 'neath the hemlock, whose thick branches bent
Beneath its bright cold burden, and kept dry
A circle, on the earth, of withered leaves,
The partridge found a shelter."

From "The Fountain," a poem filled with illustrative points, and which Durand has based some of his finest pictures on, I take a passage of exceeding beauty, to my mind.

"This tangled thicket on the bank above
Thy basin, how thy waters keep it green!
For thou dost feed the roots of the wild vine
That trails all over it, and to the twigs
Ties fast her clusters. There the epic bush lifts
Her leafy lances; the viburnum there,
Paler of foliage, to the sun holds up
Her circlet of green berries. In and out
The chirping sparrow in her coat of brown
Steals silently, lest I should mark her nest."

How complete, again, as a picture, composition, detail and all, is the following from the "Forest Hymn:"

—"These dim vaults
These winding aisles—
—The barky trunks, the ground—
The fresh moist ground, are all instinct with thee.
—And yon clear spring that midst its herbs
Wells softly forth, and wandering steepes the roots
Of half the mighty forest—
—This mighty oak
By whose immovable stem I stand—
—Nestled at his root
Is beauty, such as blooms not in the glare
Of the broad sun. That delicate forest flower
With scented breath, and look so like a smile."

Painted to your very feet! It reminds me of one of the landscapes of Titian, only I want to know the name of the flower, and am sure it has got one. But in this, from the "Winter Piece," again, you cannot so perplex yourself—

—"Along the quiet air
Come and float calmly off the soft light clouds,
Such as you see in summer, and the winds
Scarce stir the branches. Lodged in sunny cleft,
Where the cold breezes come not, blooms alone
The little wind flower,* whose just opened eye,
Is blue as the spring heaven it gazes at."

Here you have it, color and individuality, nestling down out of the cold wind, where one wants to get, and lie beside it in the spring grass, where it is bursting through the old, dead leaves, and sun himself after the long chill of winter, watching, meanwhile, the soft light clouds dreaming along through the sky until he dreams with them, and, clouds and man, we float off into a better—more blessed world, where peace and light reign.

There is a most perfect and affectionate piece of rendering in the "November:"

"Yet one smile more, departing, distant sun,
One mellow smile through the soft vapory air,
Ere o'er the frozen earth the loud winds run,
Or snows are sifted o'er the meadows bare,
One smile on the brown hills and naked trees
And the dark rocks whose summer wreaths are cast,
And the blue gentian flower, that, in the breeze,
Nods lonely, of her beauteous race the last."

But there is the next step in landscape art, the rendering of effect. An artist may be true to detail—he must be so in order to progress further, but he is dull to most minds unless he animates his pictures with a spirit. This is effect.

"Rest here, beneath the unmoving shade
And on the silent valleys gaze,
Winding and widening, till they fade
In yon soft ring of summer haze—
* * * * *

The village trees their summits rear
Still as its spire, and yonder flock
At rest in those calm fields appear
As chiselled from the lifeless rock.
* * * * *

One tranquil mount the scene o'erlooks—
There the hushed winds their sabbath keep,
While a near hum from bees and broods
Comes faintly like the breath of sleep."

"Summer Ramble."

Here is effect indicated in the "unmoving shade," a broad sunlight from a cloudless sky, under which hill and valley are hushed into repose and dream-like silence. I can only think of one of Durand's distances. The expression of space and repose is full and satisfactory. In the poem, "To a Cloud," there is a "bit" which must touch every landscapist,—

—"While below
Thy shadow o'er the vale moves slow;
There midst their labor, pause the reaper train
As cool it comes along the grain."

Solemnly and beautifully the cloud moves across the valley—one can almost see the grey shadows fitting over the golden wheat-fields and the sunlight smile following close upon them. In the "Summer Wind," the conclusion of the poem gives a fine expression of the effect of wind across the landscape—

—"All the green herbs
Are stirring in his breath; a thousand flowers,

* The Liver-leaf, formerly called Anemone Hepatica, but by the modern classification divided from the Anemones, and called Hepatica triloba. The flower commonly called the Wind-flower is white, and a friend suggested that Bryant was mistaken in calling his blue beauty the wind-flower, but as it was an anemone, and the name literally translated means wind-flower, he was perfectly correct.

By the road-side and the borders of the brook,
Nod gaily to each other; *glossy leaves*
Are twinkling in the sun, as if the dew
Were on them yet, and silver waters break
Into small waves and sparkle as he comes."

There is a perception of fulness in the foreground material,—the "road-side" and the "borders of the brook" are suggestive of detail, but the whole is entirely subordinated to the great impression—the effect of wind across the scene.

There is, moreover, a fine sense of harmony of color in many passages of these poems. I have quoted one above from "November," in speaking of detail, in which the color is most artistically felt. In "The Two Graves" is a line:

"And the shade of the beech lies cool on the rock,"

which to me suggests Kensett very forcibly. The gleaming of the cool grey from the midst of the dark green is exquisitely suggested. In the "Indian Story" there is a noble piece of color, richly sombre and harmonious—

"But far in the pine-grove, dark and cold,
Where the yellow leaf falls not,
Nor the autumn shines in scarlet and gold,
There lies a hillock of fresh, dark mould
In the deepest gloom of the spot."

Not a leaf of yellow or crimson has the artist permitted to interfere with the solemn monotony of the picture—nothing that may cheer the mind from its deathly sensation. The sentiment is complete and unbroken.

One more instance of the painting power in Bryant, and I have done. Only those who have drifted through the twilight on our quiet inland waters, and watched the blue change to golden and orange, and deepen into a glow of color that blinds the eyes, until the stars twinkled timidly out in the later grey, and the twilight glory changed to the night gloom, could feel as I feel the fulness and perfect beauty of the picture sketched only perhaps to others in the "Lines to a Waterfowl." To those who can feel it as I do, there is nothing which can be added to it:—

"Whither, midst falling dew,
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,
Far through their *rosy depths* dost thou pursue
Thy solitary way?"

"Vainly the fowler's eye
Might mark thy distant flight to do thee wrong,
As darkly limned upon the crimson sky
Thy figure floats along."

* * * * *
"Thou'rt gone, the *abyss of heaven*
Hath swallowed up thy form; yet on my heart,
Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given,
And shall not soon depart."

G. M. JAMES.

MR. WORDSWORTH dates the dawn of the modern era in Poetry from the appearance of the "Seasons," which were first published in the year 1726. A single great work will no doubt often produce surprisingly genial effects in the literary world, when the atmosphere is prepared for it. And such was the case when Thomson wrote. Many difficult influences were gradually combining to work out the same result. A high degree of general education, in connection with the prevalence of Christian religious truth, must always naturally dispose the mind to a more just appreciation of the works of the Deity, as compared with the works of man. The wider our views of each, the higher will be our admiration of the first. We say general civiliza-

tion, however; for when the advantages of education are confined to a small class, that class will usually be found only in the large towns of a country, and its tastes and habits will therefore, necessarily, be more or less artificial. The rustic population, in such a state of things, will be rude, coarse, and deemed only fit for ridicule and burlesque. The poet of such a period has no sooner tried his strength, than he is eager to turn his back on the fields; he hurries "to town," to the centre of all enlightenment, and soon becomes metamorphosed into a cockney or a courtier. In their day, Paris and London have probably thus swallowed up many a man of genius, country born, and country bred, who, had he remained in his native haunts, could never have failed in real honest feeling for that natural beauty which, like the mercy of God, is new every morning.

Had Cowper lived all his days in Bond street, he never could have written the "Task." Conceive a man like Crabbe or Burns, transported for life to Grub street, and imagine what would be the inevitable effects of the change on a spirit like theirs. But a general diffusion of civilization produces an entirely different state of things. An intellectual man may now live most of his days in the country, without disgrace and without annoyance. He may read and he may write there with pleasure and with impunity. A wide horizon for observation opens about him to-day in the fields, or elsewhere. Science, Commerce, Painting, Sculpture, Horticulture,—all the higher Arts in fact,—are so many noble laborers hourly toiling for his benefit, as well as for that of the townsman. General education is also daily enlarging the public audience, and thus giving more healthful play to diversity of tastes. No single literary class is likely, in such a state of things, to usurp undue authority over others—to impose academical fetters on even the humblest of its contemporaries. Whatever is really natural and really worthy, may, therefore, hope in the end for a share of success. But we conceive that it would still be possible for all these circumstances to unite in favoring the literature of the age, without leading it into those views of the natural world, which have so decidedly marked its course in our own day, without producing at least results so striking, a change so marked. It is, we believe, the union of Christianity with this general diffusion of a high degree of civilization, which has led us to a more deeply felt appreciation of the works of the Creation. It has always been from lands blessed with the light of Revealed Truth that the choir of praise has risen with the greatest fullness. And it would be easy, also, to prove that those individual writers, who have sung the natural beauty of the earth with the greatest fervor of feeling and truth of description, have been more or less actuated by a religious spirit. Take, as examples, the poets of our own language. How many of those who have touched upon similar subjects were moved by what may be called Christian impulses? Go back as far even as Chaucer and Dunbar, Shakespeare and Spenser, Milton and Fletcher; if these were not all what are called religious men, yet the writings of even Chaucer and Shakespeare, though tainted with the grossness of their times, were the works of believing Christian hearts. If we look nearer to our own day, from the period of Thomson and Dyer to the present hour, the fact is self-evident, and needs no repetition of names. There have been instances, no doubt, among the greater English poets of the last fifty years, where success in natural description has been combined with an avowed, or implied religious skepticism. But no man can be born and bred in a Christian community, taught in its schools, governed by its laws, educated by its literature, without unconsciously, and, as it were, in spite of himself, imbibing many influences of the prevailing faith.

Even the greatest English poets of the skeptical school are forced to resort to what appears to the reader a combination of an imperfect, enfeebled Christianity, with an incomplete and lifeless paganism. Their views of the material world almost invariably assume a Greek aspect; and we must adhere to the opinion, that in spite of their florid character, their grace of outline, their richness of detail, these fall unspeakably, immeasurably short of the grandeur, the healthful purity, the living beauty, the power and tenderness of feeling which belong to revealed truth. With the Greek, as with so many others, man was, more or less palpably, the great centre of all. Not so with the Christian; while revelation allots to him a position elevated and ennobling, she also reads him the lowest lessons. No system connects man by more close and endearing ties with the earth and all its holds, than Christianity, which leaves nothing to chance, nothing to that most gloomy and most impossible of chimeras, fate, but, refers all to Providence, to the omniscient wisdom of a God, who is Love; but, at the same time, she warns him that he is himself but the steward and priest of the Almighty Father, responsible for the use of every gift; she plainly proclaims the fact, that even here on earth, within his own domains, his position is subordinate. The highest relation of every created object is that which connects it with its Maker: "For thy pleasure they are, and were created!"

This sublime truth Christianity proclaims to us, and there is breadth enough in this single point to make up much of the wide difference between the Christian and the heathen poet. And which of these two views is most ennobling, each of us may easily decide for himself. Look at the simple flower of the field. Behold it blooming at the gracious call of the Almighty, beaming with the light of Heavenly mercy, fragrant with the holy blessing, and say if it be not thus more noble to the eye of reason, dearer to the heart, than when fancy dyed its petals with the blood of the fabled Adonis or Hyacinthus; go out and climb the highest of all the Alps, or stand beside the trackless, ever-moving sea, or look over the broad, unpeopled prairie, and tell us whence it is that the human spirit is so deeply moved by the spectacle which is there unfolded to its view. Go out at night—stand uncovered beneath the star-lit heavens, and acknowledge the meaning of the silence which has closed your lips? is it not an overpowering, heartfelt, individual humility, blended with an instinctive adoration, or acknowledgment in every faculty, of the holy majesty of the one living God, in whom we live, and move, and have our being? And where, at such a moment, are all the Gods with which Homer peopled his narrow world? An additional sense of humiliation for the race to which we belong, and which could so long endure fallacies so puerile, weighs on the spirit at the question, and with a greater than Homer, we exclaim, "O! worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; let all the earth stand in awe of Him."

A distinguished living poet of England, Mr. Keble, has a very pleasing theory in connection with the subject. In his view, the three great divisions of poetry, belong naturally to three successive periods of the world. The epic flows from the heroic youth of a race; the drama, with its varied scenes and rival interests, from the ambitious maturity of middle age, while, as civilization advances further in the cycle of time, the human heart oppressed with the strife of passion, the eye wearied with the restless pageant of vanity, turn instinctively to more simple and more healthful sources of enjoyment, and seeking refreshment from the sweetness and beauty of the natural world, give expression to the feeling in the poetry of rural life.

Miss Cooper's Country Life.